

BBQ

The 50 Best BBQ Joints . . . in the World!

Our definitive, soot-stained guide to the best purveyors of smoked meat in Texas—which is to say, the best purveyors of smoked meat on Earth.

By Texas Monthly

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Photographs by Wyatt McSpadden

Texas barbecue has no peer on earth. If you're reading this in Texas, you may wonder why we need to begin with such an obvious statement, but there are people who contend otherwise. In Kansas City they tout paltry slices of gray

beef covered in sweet ketchup; the whole thing resembles cold cuts more than barbecue, which is why their arguments generally center on sauce rather than meat. In Memphis they grill ribs over charcoal and fret about whether to hide the product under a pool of sugary sauce or cover it with flavored dust. In the Carolinas they lift their noses and say through pursed, vinegary lips that they invented barbecue. They may have a claim there, but luckily we Texans came along to perfect it.

Let's back up. The American barbecue tradition is rooted in numerous ancient practices. Caddo Indians had a method for smoking venison, and in the West Indies, natives grilled meats on a frame of green sticks. When European colonists arrived in the New World, no doubt tired of all the salt cod from the long Atlantic passage, they found a local populace given to roasting all manner of game—iguanas, fish, birds, corn, pretty much anything at hand. The Europeans' contribution to this scenario was to introduce a tasty new animal: the hog. Not only was this beast a marked improvement over the previous fare, but its own gastronomic habits proved well suited to the slop-filled environs of the burgeoning Eastern seaboard. In rural areas and colonial burghs, pigs would roam freely, indiscriminately eating trash until someone decided to roast them, which was done in the local manner—a hole in the ground, a fire, and a split hog laid directly above it on a wood frame.

Barbecue might never have advanced beyond this crude stage but for the fact that another type of animal had come to these shores at the same time as the pig: the cow. Eventually, bovines made their way up through Mexico to the vast grazing lands of Texas, and it didn't take long for us to figure out what to do with them. We started out by placing the beef directly over the flames but eventually adopted a more elegant approach by which the meat was smoked to tenderness in a chamber with a fire pit at one end and a chimney at the other. Over time, barbecue proliferated throughout the state, eventually leading to the opening of commercial establishments like Elgin's Southside Market, in 1886, and Lockhart's Kreuz Market, in 1900. We've been arguing about barbecue joints ever since.



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Unlike our friends in the South, however, our arguments involve only the important stuff—not who has the better sauce or rub but who has the best meat. And in Texas, this means beef. Sure, we smoke hogs, in the form of spareribs, pork chops, or even (gasp) pulled pork, but we specialize in the Mount Everest of barbecue: brisket. In all of barbecuedom, there is no greater challenge and no greater reward.

This year marks the fifth time that *Texas Monthly* has sought to identify the state's finest purveyors of smoked meat. In 1973—our first year of publication—we selected the top twenty joints in the state, singling out Kreuz Market and Taylor's Louie Mueller Barbecue as the best of the best. In 1997 we expanded our list to include the fifty best joints, with Kreuz and Louie Mueller still at the top. Both were—and remain—exemplars of the German meat-market style, which has always been, in this magazine's opinion, the primary form of Texas barbecue. It's true that we can boast tremendous diversity in our methods—from the glazed ribs of East Texas to the cowboy style found farther west—but the Central Texas holy trinity of brisket, sausage, and ribs (beef and pork), smoked for many hours in an indirect-heat pit and served on butcher paper, remains this state's finest contribution to the genre. Until recently, that kind of meal was synonymous with small-town joints like Kreuz and Louie Mueller. For most of the twentieth century, Texas barbecue was an indisputably rural phenomenon. Sure, there were a few iconic places in urban areas—Angelo's in Fort Worth, Otto's in Houston,

Sonny Bryan's in Dallas—but they were hardly citified. Our first fifty-best lists of the new century, compiled in 2003 and 2008, showed little change in that regard.

Then something happened. A tectonic shift occurred. Over a few short years, beginning around 2009, an unprecedented number of brand-new, very good joints opened up. (Sixteen of this year's top fifty—including two of the top four—were not even in existence five years ago.) Even more unusual, most were in cities, operated by fanatical young pitmasters like Houston's Greg Gatlin of Gatlin's BBQ, Dallas's Justin Fourton of Pecan Lodge, San Antonio's Tim Rattray of the Granary, and the biggest sensation of them all, Aaron Franklin of Franklin Barbecue, in Austin. They were traditionalists, students of the canonical joints, disciples who would bring the old ways into a new age and a new place. And they found an enthusiastic reception among not just longtime barbecue hounds but also the growing ranks of the food-obsessed, the type of people who shop at farmers' markets, stock their fridges with artisanal pickles, and tweet pictures of their meals. Suddenly, that most traditional of foods—pit-smoked meat—was reaching a much wider audience.

We are now in the golden age of Texas barbecue. A new generation has arisen to take its place beside the stalwarts, and together they are producing more truly exceptional brisket, ribs, sausage, pork loin, pork chops, pork butt, hot guts, prime rib, chopped beef, and chicken than ever before. The pitmasters featured on the following pages offer the closing argument in the long-standing case of Texas barbecue versus the world. That case may now be considered closed.

And now, we give you the fifty best barbecue joints in Texas—which is to say, the fifty best barbecue joints in the world.

—*Patricia Sharpe and Daniel Vaughn*

Franklin Barbecue



Rating: 5

Opened: 2009

Pitmaster: Aaron Franklin, age 35

Method: Post oak; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: Waiting in the long line can be fun; even more fun is ordering ahead of time. The minimum is five pounds, but best of all is getting a whole brisket (around \$100; try your luck at least two weeks in advance). Pick it up at ten-thirty and waltz through the impatient masses with your bounty.

The best barbecue joint in Texas is only four years old. This is an unusual development, but one that will surprise no one familiar with Franklin Barbecue, which, since opening in 2009, in a trailer off Interstate 35, has built a cult following for its meats. Has any other restaurant in Texas history had a consistent two-hour wait, outside, in the elements, year-round, six days a week? Franklin's current location is a cozy old brick building (it used to be Ben's Long Branch Bar-B-Q) with cement floors, sixties-era decor, and a sound system that pumps out a steady diet of laid-back country tunes. In two years, this site has become an Austin landmark, as synonymous with the city as the Armadillo World Headquarters once was. On a recent visit we met a guy from overseas who claimed to know nothing else about the state capital except that it was home to this magnificent restaurant.

The root cause of the mania is simple: Aaron Franklin (who runs the joint with his wife, Stacy) has achieved with his brisket a level of perfection that is rare for any cook to attain with any food, let alone one so notoriously difficult to master. The Franklin brisket (all-natural beef smoked for twelve to eighteen hours) comes out profoundly flavorful and moist with a rich, dark, salty-peppery crust and a rim of sublime, flawlessly rendered fat. This, in fact, is part of Franklin's secret: his hormone- and antibiotic-free beef—uncommon for a barbecue joint—seems to behave a little differently on the pit; the fat, in particular, yields more readily to low heat than the denser fat found in the usual over-the-counter brisket. That may sound overly technical, but just put it in your mouth: it's nothing short of astounding how good this meat is. The lean brisket is more tender than most joints' fatty slices. As for the burnt ends, well, we are unashamed to say that we'd sell our soul for a pile of them. No brisket was ever less in need of assistance, but Franklin's espresso sauce—deep and velvety, with a subtle sweetness—is a remarkable complement to his beef. Together, the two make a knee-buckling marriage of flavors. So after enjoying several unadorned slices, go ahead and dip one. It's okay.

Part of what makes Franklin so good is his unbelievable consistency with brisket. But he's no one-trick pony. The meaty pork ribs have a delicious pepper-rimmed crust, and the beef-and-pork sausage, made locally to his specifications, has a great snap. (This is the only possible gripe we can find with Franklin Barbecue—the sausage isn't made in-house.) Drifting outside the Central Texas canon, Franklin offers pulled pork that's tender and smoky, with a dash of vinegar sauce. The turkey, a meat we normally avoid, is infused with smoke flavor and has a great crust; on a recent visit slices stayed moist for an impressive 45 minutes. Other not-to-be-missed signature offerings include the Topsy Texan sandwich (chopped beef and sausage piled very high with slaw) and a heady bourbon-banana pie.

It is inevitable that there will be backlash when any restaurant reaches the heights that Franklin Barbecue has attained (earlier this year *Bon Appétit* named it one of the country's twenty most important restaurants, a list that also included fancy-schmancy New York eateries like Le Bernardin,

Balthazar, and Momofuku). But this meat is worth every bit of praise it has received—and every hour you spend waiting to eat it. Experiencing Franklin Barbecue right now is like watching Lance Armstrong or Barry Bonds at their performance-enhanced best, when they seemed to magically tower over everyone else. Except Aaron Franklin is doing it clean (not counting the enormous amount of espresso he consumes every morning). And, we might add, doing it with modesty and thoughtfulness, despite the pressure that comes with such a meteoric rise. At this point, he could probably take his press clippings and go big-time, opening a three-hundred-seat Texas-style joint in Times Square and laughing all the way to the bank. But at heart, he's still a kid from Bryan who just wants to make good 'cue (he has, however, started selling his sauce at H-E-B). Let us give thanks that he keeps dragging himself out of bed in the early-morning hours to cook for us.

900 E. 11th, 512-653-1187. Open Tue–Sun 11 till meat runs out. Beer.

franklinbarbecue.com

Pecan Lodge



Rating: 4.75

Opened: 2010

Pitmaster: Justin Fourton, age 37

Method: Mesquite; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: If you have a group, go for the Trough, a sampler of all the meats that will feed—and amaze—four to five people.

Shed #2 at the Dallas Farmers Market is a vast, enclosed, and fully air-conditioned structure that essentially serves as a city-owned food court where up-and-coming restaurateurs crowd in to show off their skills. The unquestioned anchor tenant of this gastro-carnival is Pecan Lodge, a three-year-old barbecue joint producing what is hands-down the best smoked meat in North Texas. It's easy to find because their counter is just inside the front door, and also because a line of fifty or more people is hard to miss. They're all here for the barbecue (all right, a few are here for the excellent fried chicken or the stuffed sweet potato known as the Hot Mess), and the line hasn't gone anywhere since Pecan Lodge was featured on the Food Network about a year ago.

Suffice it to say, this is not your typical joint, and it does not have a typical origin story. Not so long ago, co-owners (and husband and wife) Justin and Diane Fourton had busy corporate jobs as management consultants for Accenture. Looking to slow down, they left the rat race and started a catering company, serving mostly Southern food. Justin, who is from Abilene, had learned to smoke meat from his grandparents and turned out to have an unusual knack for it (he's also a voracious 'cue hound who constantly travels the state trying other joints, which is actually uncommon for a pitmaster). His barbecue quickly attained local renown, and once they added the farmers' market booth, in 2010, things pretty much blew up. So much for slowing down. Even though they're open just four days a week, an average workday for Justin lasts sixteen hours and one of those off days is dedicated to stuffing two kinds of homemade sausage by hand.

It still beats the rat race. Fourton's pork links have a nice paprika kick and a strong mesquite flavor, and a beef sausage with fresh jalapeño and cheese is our new favorite. The pork ribs are juicy but can sometimes be a little heavy on the sweet glaze. A heavily smoked crust and rendered fat are laced together in a pile of pulled pork, which even purists will be tempted to dunk

in the sweet vinegar dipping sauce. You won't need a drop of sauce, however, to enjoy the beef. Gargantuan beef ribs are nearly always expertly smoked. The right level of tenderness is hard to achieve on this fatty cut, which requires real patience. Fourton struggled one month when his beef supplier kept sending him ribs that weighed in at two pounds apiece and simply would not get tender. But things must have worked themselves out. On our last two visits, the beef ribs were exceptional, with silky fistfuls of pepper-coated meat that easily came away from the bone.

As for the brisket, the first bite reminds us of the heights that this cut can achieve in the right hands. Each slice has the aggressive smokiness we expect from mesquite, but it doesn't come along with any of the creosote flavor that is often that wood's downfall. The fatty end is devilishly rich, but it's in the lean end that Fourton really shows his ability. The flat, as it's known, is very easy to dry out from overcooking, but his lean slices are impeccably moist and need only a slight tug to separate. If too much dried-out barbecue has you questioning the simple perfection of smoked brisket, Pecan Lodge will restore your faith.

Confronted with such a selection of meats, you may despair at the thought of sides, but do save room or you'll be missing some of the best mac and cheese in Texas (flecked with bacon and green chile) and excellent collard greens with just a hint of brown sugar. Banana pudding fans will love this version, made from Diane's grandmother's recipe, and the newest dessert addition, peach cobbler with a sugary crumbled topping, is rightfully gaining popularity. Getting a taste of Pecan Lodge's wondrous grub means a bit of a wait (up to an hour on weekends), but any hardships will be forgotten when you're wiping that speck of beef rib off your chin.

920 S. Harwood, 214-748-8900. Open Thur–Sun 11 till meat runs out.

pecanlodge.com

Snow's BBQ



Rating: 4.75

Opened: 2003

Pitmaster: Tootsie Tomanetz, age 78

Method: Post oak; indirect-heat pit (brisket); direct-heat pit (everything else)

Pro tip: Arrive no later than nine in the morning if you want to order from the full menu.

For some in the small town of Lexington (population roughly 1,200), Saturdays are as holy as Sundays. It's hard to miss these devotees. They congregate at the end of Main Street, within view of some grain elevators dressed in a gingham rust—a line of farmhands, ranchers, well-off weekenders, and groggy young Austinites who woke up in their cutoff shorts. Gathered outside the small red building that houses Snow's BBQ, they await their turn to commune with some of the state's most perfect meat.

Snow's has an outsized reputation (thanks, in part, to this magazine's naming it the state's best joint back in 2008), but it remains a no-frills operation: a homey kitchen with painted wooden signs; old picnic tables beneath a galvanized-metal roof, completely blackened with smoke; and an array of gloriously sooty pits, including a three-level monster the size and shape of a submarine. Pay close attention if it's your first time visiting Snow's. That woman out back in the apron is Tootsie Tomanetz, quite possibly the

greatest female pitmaster in Texas history. She begins her vigil at two in the morning every Saturday; with the help of her son Hershe and Snow's owner, Kerry Bexley, she tends the fire throughout the night to maintain a temperature of between 250 and 275 degrees. The result? Brisket with a velvety mahogany crust and deeply flavorful meat so tender it almost melts. We prefer the fatty brisket, though the lean is plenty moist. Either one is capable of achieving transcendence, but if you ask Tootsie, she'll tell you her specialty is the pork steak, which is cooked in the direct-heat pit. It's a cut from the shoulder (where most pulled pork comes from as well), and Tootsie has its number. The meat comes out like no pork you've ever tasted—as full and luscious as a great beef steak, shot through with pockets of delectable fat.

Other meats are excellent, but they have a hard time living up to the incredible standard set by the brisket and pork steak. The sausage, a beef-pork blend made by the butcher down the street, is very good—succulent and smoky, with a granular texture—and the ribs are fine, though not as tender as they could be. The sauce, tangy and sweet, usually sits forlornly on the table unused (though it's a nice addition to the ribs). The buttery pinto beans are so simple and silken that the fact that they are free (scoop as much as you'd like from the crockpot) seems like management oversight. The pecan pie, from Fourth Street Bakery, holds its form and is deliciously balanced, but with meat this good, even the dessert-obsessed are better off finishing their meal with another helping of the brisket or pork.

516 Main, 979-542-8189 (weekdays), 979-773-4640 (Saturdays). Open Sat only, 8 till meat runs out. snowsbbq.com

Louie Mueller Barbecue



Rating: 4.75

Opened: 1949

Pitmaster: Wayne Mueller, age 47 (since 2008)

Method: Post oak; indirect-heat pit.

Pro tip: The legendary beef rib weighs as much as a Volkswagen, but don't be deterred. You must try one.

Louie Mueller Barbecue has been described as a “cathedral of smoke,” and indeed, many of the trappings of organized religion are present here: the sacramental offerings, the priesthood in their ecclesiastical red apron-robos, the flock of devoted congregants, even the disciples (Austin barbecue star Aaron Franklin credits bite of brisket on a trip to Louie Mueller in 2002 with his own conversion to the fatty faith). At most other joints, this level of veneration might feel off-putting, but Louie Mueller earns every bit of it. Not only has it been in business for 64 years (54 at the present location, which was formerly a gymnasium), but it also consistently delivers some of the best barbecue the state has to offer. On our last visit, the brisket, ringed with a finger-width coarse-pepper crust, was the Platonic ideal of the Central Texas meat-market style—the fat was rendered to perfection, and the smoke-infused meat was so tender that even the idea of a fork and knife seemed preposterous. Louie Mueller is justly famous for its massive beef rib, a prehistoric sampling of fatty deliciousness so rich that one bite has been

known to induce dizziness and swooning. Similar beef ribs can now be found on the menu at no fewer than three new Austin joints, but nothing compares with the original. Eating the beef rib at Louie Mueller—bone in hand, surrounded by the soot-stained walls and blackened wood ceilings that have resulted from half a century of smoking—is probably the most primal experience Texas barbecue has to offer. Other meats shine as well. Pork ribs are solid; the all-beef sausage, which is made in-house, has a nice peppery flavor and a great snap, but if you really want a kick, don't miss the excellent jalapeño variety, as brilliant a use of this ubiquitous chile pepper as we've seen. Sides are standard and barely merit a mention, but only a fool would waste space on them anyway. Even the sauce seems designed to get out of the way—it's an unusually thin, tomato-based broth best used on the bread. Just after our last top fifty list was published, in 2008, Louie Mueller's son Bobby, who had operated the joint for 34 years, died. The torch has now passed to Bobby's son Wayne, and after an adjustment period, the restaurant is as good as it's ever been. If we have one complaint, it's that Wayne has been introducing noncanonical dishes, such as pulled pork and sweet-and-spicy baby back ribs. Both are excellent, but it's sort of like showing up for Sunday services at the Catholic church and getting a Baptist revival.

206 W. 2nd, 512-352-6206. Open Mon–Fri 11–6, Sat 10–6.

louiemuellerbarbecue.com

The Original Willie's Bar-B-Q



Rating: 4

Opened: 1992

Pitmaster: Arturo Lanteros, age 61 (since 2003)

Method: Pecan; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: Get a few slices of the smoked fajita meat.

With rattlesnake skin tacked to the particleboard walls, wagon wheel chandeliers, and black-and-white-checked tablecloths, Willie's aesthetic can be described *Little House on the Prairie* chic. This joint has a large menu that caters to local tastes (brisket tacos, fajita plates), and it was packed during the weekday lunch rush. Meats are all available by the pound, with the tender pork ribs (smoked to perfection with pecan wood, a rarity in South Texas, where mesquite tends to be the norm) being the standout protein. Willie's thin, sweet sauce serves as a nice complement. While beef ribs are sometimes more visually appealing than they are delicious, the ones here do not disappoint, featuring a hearty smoke flavor and fully rendered fat. Skip the bland sausage.

320 S. Alamo Rd., 956-702-1370. Open Mon–Sat 11–9, Sun 11–

5. originalwilliesbbq.com

Tyler's Barbeque

Rating: 4

Opened: 2010

Pitmaster: Tyler Frazer, age 45

Method: Mesquite; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: The homemade green-chile-and-grilled-onion mac and cheese is served only on Thursdays.

Our first visit to Tyler's Barbeque was a failure. The staff was friendly and the food was great, particularly the tender brisket with its peppery crust and subtle smoke ring, but we arrived too late to try the pork ribs, whose praises were being sung all over the High Plains. So we did what any true barbecue connoisseur would do: after consoling ourselves with the sausage (four kinds!) and drowning our sorrows in some tasty homemade beans, we resolved to come back early the next day. This turned out to be a wise decision. The ribs had a firm, toothsome crust, with a smoky flavor. They were fine without sauce, but a dab of the sweet, black-pepper-dotted concoction from the giant dispensary near the pickles helped give them a little kick (with a satisfyingly slow burn). You can be forgiven if you haven't heard of this spot. Amarillo native Tyler Frazer opened it in May 2010, in an old Long John Silver's just south of Interstate 40, and in just three years, he's singlehandedly upgraded the reputation of Panhandle barbecue. Poke around the kitchen all you want, but you won't find a microwave or a gas cooker or even a freezer, because everything is done from scratch. This is a guy who knows his stuff. He cooks on mesquite that he has brought in from Hall County, about one hundred miles away, because the soil is sandier and grows trees instead of scrub brush. There is, however, one modern convenience that Frazer embraces: follow him on Twitter @tylersbarbeque to know when items run out, and you'll avoid the failure of our first visit.

2014 Paramount, 806-331-2271. Open Tue-Sat 11-8. tylersbarbeque.com

John Mueller Meat Co.



Rating: 4.5

Opened: 2013

Pitmaster: John Mueller, age 44

Method: Oak; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: John may yell at you. Don't take it personally.

If there's a dark prince of Texas barbecue, it's probably John Mueller, the famously irascible, hugely talented, at times erratic master of meat who left his family's legendary joint—Louie Mueller Barbecue, in Taylor—and set out on his own in 2001 with John Mueller's B-B-Q, on Austin's East Side. By 2003, that joint had acquired both a fanatical following and a spot on our top fifty list. The briskets were the best in town, and John was famous for handing out a gratis nibble just as you neared the counter (a famous Louie Mueller touch). But in 2006, a rough patch led to John's losing his restaurant. He disappeared for a while, only to pop back up at JMueller BBQ, a trailer eatery in South Austin, in 2011. The joint was a partnership with his sister, LeAnn (who, full disclosure, is a *Texas Monthly* contributing photographer). It was excellent, and John's funny, profane Twitter presence (he's @ShoelessJoeJaxn) gave the place an appealingly renegade quality. Unfortunately, just as it was beginning to build a solid reputation, a major

spat between the siblings caused John to decamp once again. LeAnn changed the name to La Barbecue and didn't miss a beat. Her brother kept quiet for a spell, only to resurface this spring with his new joint. Meanwhile, LeAnn's other brother, Wayne, continues to man the pits in Taylor, as he has since 2008. This means that the three children of Bobby Mueller, perhaps the greatest pitmaster in Texas history, now all have their own joints, all within a one-hour drive. Sibling rivalry never tasted so good.

John's joint, which debuted in February on a lot in East Austin, is the newest of the three. It consists of a large pit on a red flatbed trailer, a food truck to one side, and some picnic tables under a blue-and-white tent. As always, customers line up like eager schoolchildren, and as always, the meat is outstanding. On our last visit, the beef ribs and fatty brisket tied for best in show. The oak smoke had penetrated deeply, giving each bite fathoms of flavor. Mueller gets a crust on his meat that's a little more delicate than some others, although it still looks like it was dredged in black pepper. The lean brisket and the pork ribs were great as well, and we were blown away by the pork shoulder. It has a gorgeous, chestnut-colored exterior, lightly brushed with a sweet glaze that subtly hints at a Southern allegiance. The rosy meat contains a world of complex tastes. As for the sauce, a thin and nearly translucent brew, with hints of tomato and a ton of black pepper and sweet onion, it's out of this world. Order an extra portion and eat it like soup.

2500 E. 6th, entrance on Pedernales. Open Tue–Sun 10:30 till meat runs out (usually early afternoon). johnmuellermeatco.com

La Barbecue



Rating: 4.5

Opened: 2012

Pitmaster: John Lewis, age 34

Method: Post oak; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: There's free beer Friday through Sunday.

In this case, “La” is not a definite article referring to the “Cuisine Texicana” this relatively new joint says it serves; it’s an abbreviation referring to the first name of the co-owner LeAnn Mueller, granddaughter of the founder of Taylor’s famous Louie Mueller Barbecue (disclosure: LeAnn is a contributing photographer at *Texas Monthly*). Housed in a little trailer with a few picnic tables under old pecan and live oak trees, this eatery opened in 2011 as JMueller BBQ, the ballyhooed comeback of LeAnn’s brother John, who had run a well-thought-of joint on Austin’s East Side that went out of business in 2006. Enormously talented but famously ill-tempered, John lasted a little over a year here, before a spat with his sister caused a split between the siblings. LeAnn changed the name; hired pitmaster John Lewis, previously of Franklin Barbecue; and didn’t miss a beat. Her brother, meanwhile, went silent for a spell, only to resurface yet again at John Mueller Meat Co.

If you set aside the complexity of this labyrinthine family drama, however, what you’ll find at La Barbecue is the beautiful simplicity of some expertly

smoked meat. Lewis has made three changes since taking the helm—he built a new pit, began ordering USDA Prime brisket, and started making his own sausage. On a recent visit, the brisket, which he cooks for twelve to fifteen hours at about 275 degrees, had a dark-red smoke ring and fell apart on our butcher paper. We picked up our first moist piece with our fingers and noticed no chunks hanging below, a sign of perfectly rendered fat. The salt-and-pepper rub on the fatty bark hit just the right mix with the smoke, and the lean was equally impressive. (Lewis told us that he’s been getting more smoke absorbed into the meat by using a wet rub of hot dog mustard and pickle juice and finishing it off with salt, coarse pepper, and garlic powder.) A massive beef rib had that classic Louie Mueller exterior, and we twisted off a one-inch hunk for a taste. It was flawless: juicy and smoky, with the richness you’d expect. The sausage had an unusual but welcome kick, and the succulent pulled pork had been moistened with a tangy vinegar-based sauce. Chipotle coleslaw (which is sometimes a little too spicy) and classic potato salad rounded out a top-notch meal. A while back, after he left Franklin Barbecue, Lewis was considering moving out of Texas, but he has since become part-owner of La Barbecue, so we should have him around for a long time. This is especially good news, because in April he unveiled his huge new personally designed pit, which is producing even better results than before, if that is possible.

1502 S. 1st, 512-605-9696. Open Wed–Sun 11 till meat runs out. Beer.

labarbecue.com

Lamberts Downtown Barbecue



Rating: 4.25

Opened: 2006

Pitmaster: Zach Davis, age 34 (since 2012)

Method: Oak; gas-fired smoker

Pro tip: Malbec pairs well with brisket.

Some people may be turned off by the description at the bottom of the Lamberts menu: “Fancy Barbecue?” But there are so many outstanding dishes at this establishment, we urge you to put preconceived notions out of your mind. Plus, the restaurant (we can’t bring ourselves to call it a joint) is housed in a historic, brick-walled general store built in 1873, so at least it has an old-fashioned feel. The brisket, rubbed with brown sugar and coffee, has a good crust, and while the lean was a little dry, the fat on the moist slice was nicely rendered. It doesn’t have the powerful smoky flavor a wood pit produces, but executive chef (not, technically, pitmaster) Zach Davis does very well with his gasser. The pork ribs, crusted with a fennel and coriander rub and maple glaze, were a little overcooked but still yummy, and the jalapeño sausage had a decent kick. The chicken rubbed with achiote and lime was soft and flavorful. Three sauces were equally tasty: a thick house sauce with a good tang, a hot sauce that was similar to the house but with

heat, and a yellow mustard with a light tang. Side dishes were out of this world. That's usually a backhanded compliment but not meant to be one here —homemade mac and cheese came fresh-baked from the oven, the potato salad had a good snap, the collards were tender (with bacon!), and the slaw was lightened up with cilantro. We finished with bread pudding that was heavy on the whiskey, wishing we had more room.

401 W. 2nd, 512-494-1500. Lunch: Mon–Fri 11–2:30; dinner: Sun–Wed 5:30–10, Thur–Sat 5:30–10:30; brunch Sat & Sun 11–2. Full bar.

lambertsaustrin.com

Stiles Switch BBQ & Brew



Rating: 4

Opened: 2011

Pitmaster: Lance Kirkpatrick, age 43

Method: Post oak; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: Ask for your Thorndale sausage “dry,” meaning smoked longer.

This place comes with rock-solid credentials: The pitmaster, Lance Kirkpatrick, worked under Bobby Mueller at Taylor’s Louie Mueller Barbecue for nine years. Following that, he briefly succumbed to the lure of a

fine-dining kitchen, but last year Austin entrepreneur Shane Stiles beckoned Kirkpatrick to the pits once again. We're grateful he did. Only a year after taking over the corner of a little shopping center, Kirkpatrick seems to have the hang of his surroundings. A loyal customer base now packs the long wooden tables during lunch hours. On our last visit, the fatty brisket and beef ribs were the standout items, but the pork ribs and sausage weren't far behind. The key is not to bother with the lean brisket, which came out dry and uninspiring; the superb fatty is what you want. We also loved the beef rib's peppery crust, which balanced nicely with the tender interior. Spareribs are good too—the half-inch smoke ring gave us a perfect bite. All the sausages—Thorndale (beef), Switch Original (beef and pork), and jalapeño-cheddar (also beef and pork)—were well seasoned, with a snappy casing. Sides and desserts are solid, and those who don't have to go back to work can choose from six kinds of beer on tap or dozens of other selections in bottles.

6610 N. Lamar Blvd., 512-380-9199. Open Sun & Tue–Thur 11–9, Fri & Sat 11–10. Beer & wine. stileswitchbbq.com

Miller's Smokehouse



Rating: 4.25

Opened: 2008

Pitmaster: Dirk Miller, age 48, and Robert Reid, age 40

Method: Post and live oak; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: Take home some sausage from the butcher case.

If Miller's were in Austin, it might have started in a food truck. Instead, Dirk Miller began cooking in the front room of his meat-processing and taxidermy business, which opened in 2006. First came sausage wraps and pulled pork in 2008; he started "throwing briskets" on the smoker a year later. Good move, as his brisket is now one of the best in the state, with great flavor, nice bark, and juicy, melty, beautifully rendered fatty slices. In 2011 Miller took the plunge and converted the building into a full-time restaurant (the meat-processing operation was moved to another building). He built out a roadhouse-style dining area in the back to supplement the cramped front room with yellow booths (taken from a former Subway) and started cooking. The result? Miller's serves up around five hundred pounds of its own pork-and-beef sausage each week: regular, jalapeño-cheese, and a pre-smoked hot link (they also have dried "snack sticks" and a brisket summer sausage). All of them are excellent: a crumbly yet firm well-seasoned filling in a tight, nicely smoked casing. No sauce is needed for the brisket, naturally, but it's the perfect tangy-sweet accompaniment to the hot link on a piece of white bread. Potato salad is made elsewhere, but the beans are prepared in-house and deliciously peppery and simple, with no added flavoring or hunks of meat.

For the first couple of years, Miller's maintained a casual, "until we run out" sort of air. But now that business has picked up, Miller and his right-hand man smoke in shifts (with one starting at three in the morning and one at eight), meaning you can show up here for supper and be sure you're getting meat that hasn't been sitting for very long. Pork ribs only get a turn on Friday and Saturday, which is also when the cornbread makes an appearance. Dirk's wife, Lisa, makes both that and the pies, including coconut-pecan, which sells out every day, and County Fair, with chocolate and peanut butter chips and walnuts. Miller's doesn't have a billboard on Interstate 35, but it's very

close to the highway, making it an ideal place to stop on a Dallas-Austin jaunt.

208 N. Penelope, 254-939-5500. Open Tue–Thur 10:30–6:30, Fri & Sat 10:30–9. Beer and margaritas. wildmillers.com

Fargo's Pit BBQ



Rating: 4.5.

Opened: 2000

Pitmaster: Alan Caldwell, age 49

Method: Oak (and another unspecified wood); indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: Always choose ribs over rib tips.

A few months back Fargo's moved out of its original building, a cramped place that lacked indoor seating—or outdoor seating, for that matter. Though the restaurant is now located just a few blocks from the first location, the large dining room, lined with big windows, feels miles away. One thing that hasn't changed is the friendly but efficient service. A line forms along the large glass case, where the meats are all on display.

What you won't find on display is the pit. Pitmaster Alan Caldwell prefers to keep his exact smoking method a closely guarded trade secret. Even the woodpile is hidden behind a cinder-block wall and a tarp-covered gate. We've spotted some oak back there, and the flavor of the ribs suggests commercial charcoal, but Caldwell refuses to confirm or deny either one. No matter the method, the meats that come out of his mystery pit are spectacular. The spareribs are hefty (Fargo's uses a larger than normal rack), and the well-seasoned pork and layers of expertly rendered fat come away from the bone more easily than you'd expect for such a large rib. As for the brisket, well, rarely will you find a deeper smoky flavor or a thicker smoke ring. Beneath a bark that almost crackles is juicy meat with just enough salt to keep you coming back for more. The brisket from the flat can be spotty (sometimes cut too thick, sometimes a bit dry) when compared with the consistently high quality of the fatty slices, so go lean with caution. But you can safely waive all caution when confronted with the chicken. The hard-to-attain combination of moist, smoky meat and crispy skin is on target, and the addictive seasoning makes this bird hard to put down. If you need a sweet counterpoint, look no further than the peach cobbler. One order is plenty to share, but you may not want to.

720 N. Texas Ave., 979-778-3662. Open Tue–Sat 11–7. Cash only.

Brooks' Place



Rating: 4.25

Opened: 2009

Pitmaster: Trent Brooks, age 43

Method: Red oak, pecan, hickory, and mesquite; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: Look for the Ace Hardware sign; you'll never see the trailer.

Trent Brooks was working as a materials specialist for a gas-compression company when a supervisor, who knew of Brooks's talent as a part-time pitmaster, referred him to an ad on Craigslist for a \$12,000 mobile smoker. Brooks negotiated the price down to \$4,500, and the rest, as they say, is Houston barbecue history. Brooks quit his day job and set up his smoker in an Ace Hardware parking lot in the nether regions of Cypress, a bustling bedroom community northwest of Houston. This was not, however, a plunge into a completely new world for him. Brooks learned the art of smoked meat from his father, who still has a barbecue catering business in the Acres Homes neighborhood of Houston, a hotbed of shade-tree barbecue operations and classic East Texas-style 'cue. Brooks's own style borrows from the Southern tradition of pork-centric barbecue, but he combines it with a mastery of smoked beef that is usually limited to Central Texas. In time, even the most skeptical of Houston 'cue hounds were making regular

trips to Cypress to taste Brooks's brisket. It's minimally trimmed—an anomaly in Houston barbecue, where “fat” is a four-letter word—resulting in moist, perfectly rendered meat with a crusty, jiggly fat cap still attached. Ribs and sausage are top-notch too. Kicked-up baked beans redolent of oregano and simple, fresh-made garlic potatoes round out the menu.

18020 FM 529, 832-893-1682. Open Wed–Sat 11–7, Sun 11–5.

brookspplacebbq.com

Lockhart Smokehouse

Dallas



Rating: 4.5

Opened: 2011

Pitmasters: Tim McLaughlin, age 33, and Will Fleischman, age 41

Method: Post oak; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: Check the cooler case for weird daily goodies like smoked-brisket deviled eggs and house-smoked bacon.

The closest some Dallasites will get to a Central Texas barbecue experience could well be ordering meat by the pound at Lockhart Smokehouse. The similarity to Kreuz Market, in Lockhart, isn't an accident. Co-owner Jill Bergus is part of the Schmidt family, who run Kreuz Market, and she and her partner (and husband), Jeff, wanted to strive for that Central Texas vibe. Customers place their orders in the back in full view of the cutting board. Meats (including Kreuz-made sausages shipped from Lockhart) are piled onto butcher paper along with bread or saltines. Forks and sauce weren't available when they opened, but the Berguses have since acquiesced to locals who were demanding both. The fatty brisket (and the occasional burnt end) is the surefire order. The thick black crust is a robust mix of smoke and the joint's caramelized rub. The beef pulls apart easily and retains its moisture well. The lean brisket slices tend to dry out, so opt for the shoulder clod if it's a leaner slice you're craving. Pork spare ribs have steadily improved since the joint opened and are now some of the most consistent menu items. The seasoning mix is complex and a bit sweet, which works well with the smoky pork. The aforementioned Kreuz sausage (85 percent beef, 15 percent pork) is always nicely smoked (we prefer the jalapeño variety, which provides a pleasant heat that doesn't overpower), and it's hard to go wrong with a thick pork chop or a hefty beef rib, offered Wednesdays only. But do save room: as much thought is put into the sides as the meat. A creamy and rich mac and cheese, two kinds of coleslaw, and brisket-and-blue-cheese hominy are all great options if you didn't already order more brisket than you can eat.

400 W. Davis, 214-944-5521. Open daily 11 till meat runs out. Bar.

lockhartsmokehouse.com

Austin's BBQ and Catering



Rating: 4.25

Opened: 1982

Pitmaster: Ron Janow, age 55

Method: Pecan; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: The buttermilk pie is worth your time.

If you're in the market for brisket, be sure to get the fatty rather than the lean, and be sure they leave the crust on when cutting your order. We didn't know to say anything on our first visit, and our brisket came out looking scalped. When the bark is on, it's commendable stuff. The smoke ring is dark and well defined, and the pecan wood gives the meat a nice flavor kick—not as strong as mesquite but less mild than hickory or post oak. As long as you're getting a three-meat plate, your second choice should be pork ribs, firm in texture with a better-than-average crust and porky flavor enhanced by a salt-and-pepper rub. Your third meat (actually, your first) should be the excellent and richly flavorful beef-and-pork sausage, firm to the tooth, flecked with ample bits of fat, and possessing a coarse texture that you never get with the commercial stuff.

507 E. Main, 979-234-5250. Open Wed 9–4, Thur–Sat 9–6, Sun 9–4.

McMillan's Bar-B-Q



Rating: 4

Opened: 1974

Pitmaster: Louis McMillan, age 67

Method: Oak, mesquite, and pecan; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: The owner likes to talk.

The tiny town of Fannin is famous for exactly two things. The first is for being the site of the 1836 Battle of Coleto Creek during the Texas Revolution, where Texians under Colonel James W. Fannin surrendered to the Mexican army, only to be marched to Goliad and executed en masse several days later. The second (and happier) source of the town's notoriety is that it is home to a tidy red building with a corrugated roof from which issues forth the best smoked meat in Goliad County. Welcome to McMillan's Bar-B-Q. Located on a lonely stretch of U.S. 59 between Goliad and Victoria, it's one of those out-of-the-way places that barbecue hounds love to stumble upon. There is a comfortable covered outside seating area, and inside, where chatty, engaging owner Louis McMillan presides, it's cozy and stuffed with memorabilia, featuring autographed one-dollar bills from customers. The star of the menu

is the brisket, as you might expect. McMillan smokes it for fifteen hours using an unusual combination of oak, mesquite, and pecan. Our sampling featured a camera-ready crust that tasted as good as it looked. The sausage was firm, with a nice snap to it, and a good balance of meat, salt, and fat. The sides—beans, potato salad, and slaw—were solidly tasty, and the sauce, medium-thick and with an eye-opening vinegar zip, was outstanding. The only disappointment was our order of St. Louis ribs, which lacked texture and were a bit on the fatty side—not terrible, but nowhere near as good as that brisket.

9913 U.S. 59 N. 361-645-2336. Open Sun–Thur 10–6, Fri & Sat 10–7:30.

Cousin's Bar-B-Q



Rating: 4.25

Opened: 1983

Pitmaster: Cliff Payne, age 58

Method: Hickory; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: They serve ultra-lean brisket unless you specify. Ask for some fat.

With six locations—two of which are in the Dallas–Fort Worth International Airport—this family-run operation could be considered a chain now and, thus, not admissible for this list. But rules are made to be broken, especially when a plateful of expertly smoked meat is before you. We still like the original Cousin’s. It doesn’t have much curb appeal: a plain joint located in a shopping center set back from a six-lane road on the outskirts of south Fort Worth. But the smell of smoke that greets you once you’ve walked through the glass doors lets you know you’ve come to the right place. The ordering process is classic cafeteria style. With tray in hand you drift down the line, inspecting the meats in front of you and directing the meat cutter as you wish. We highly recommend that you instruct him to slice from the fatty end of the brisket and keep it coming. When this joint is on its game, there’s no better brisket in Fort Worth. The smokiness pervades the meat, and the thin strip of well-rendered fat clinging to each slice adds a nice punch of saltiness. (You might be tempted to reach for the ever-so-slightly-tart sauce—molasses and tamarind are two of the sixteen ingredients.) Other meats are good but not flawless. Smallish and thin pork ribs were perfectly tender, but the rub was too liberally applied, masking some of the smokiness. The pulled pork was juicy and flavorful but could have used less sauce and more dark, crusty bits. If you have stomach space to spare after all that meat (or even if you don’t), turn next to the small side dishes that you inevitably added to your tray as you went down the line. The crispy fried okra, buttery mac and cheese, and gooey (but never goopy) peach cobbler will have you wondering if it’s too late to be adopted by Boots and Beverly (the old-timers who started Cousin’s). Luckily for you, the Paynes consider all of their loyal customers to be “distant cousins.” Just don’t expect to be given the family discount.

6262 McCart Ave., 817-346-2511. Open Mon–Sat 11–9. Beer & wine.

cousinsbbq.com

Longoria’s BBQ



Rating: 4

Opened: 1995

Pitmaster: David Longoria, age 50 (since 2002)

Method: Post oak and a little pecan; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: The beef jerky—made with brisket and cured in the pit—is an excellent gift, if you don't eat it all on the drive back.

In 1975 a Bell Helicopter employee named Fidencio “Fred” Longoria began making his own sausage in his kitchen at home. He wanted to create links as good as those he remembered eating in Gonzales as a child. In 1990, after years of tinkering, he finally solidified his recipe for sausage made of coarsely ground brisket that’s smoked for hours over oak. With that recipe as his secret weapon, he opened Longoria’s. It’s no wonder Fred’s son David, who now runs the restaurant—a corrugated-metal shack with tables on the porch and a drive-through window in what was once Everman, now part of Fort Worth—refused the chance to be on Guy Fieri’s *Diners, Drive-Ins, and Dives* when he learned he’d have to divulge his father’s prized formula (we know it involves a filling of 100 percent ground brisket and a mouthwatering blend of spices). They happily give away free samples of this signature item at the counter, though, as you mull over their other menu choices, which include

brisket burgers. So what about the brisket itself? We found it to be a tad on the dry side but infused with a palate-pleasing smokiness. The massive pork ribs, on the other hand, were juicy and flavorful, had just the right amount of char, and threatened to break our plastic plate—also laden with slaw and green beans. If we'd been able to eat a bite more, we'd also have ordered the homemade tamales and chorizo.

*100 Christopher Dr., 817-568-9494. Open Mon–Fri 10:30–6, Sat 10:30–4.
longoriasbbq.com*

Cranky Frank's Barbeque Company

Rating: 4.25

Opened: 2003

Pitmasters: Daniel Martin, age 40, and Glenn Wilke, age 60

Method: Mesquite; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: Frank, who was an infant when his parents opened the restaurant, is not so cranky anymore.

As popular as this Hill Country hamlet is among the day-tripping set, Fredericksburg has historically suffered from a surprising dearth of top-rate barbecue. No more. Just a mile and a half south of the knickknack and potpourri emporiums of bustling Main Street stands Cranky Frank's Barbeque Company. Once inside the brightly colored building, make your way to the counter where, guided by the menu above and whoever is manning the cutting board, you can place your order for toothsome and juicy “marbled” brisket (lean, meaning not quite as marbled, is also an option, of course), perfectly crusted pork ribs, and snappy and black-peppery sausage. There's tender and moist pork shoulder too. And chicken. And beer (or “bier,” as they market it to the tourists back on the busy *hauptstrasse*). If you choose to go the plate route, the pinto beans, potato salad, green beans, whole-kernel corn, coleslaw, and chocolate pudding are help-yourself and all-you-can-eat. Grab a seat at one of the indoor tables or dig in alfresco at one of the picnic tables, covered in cheerful red-and-white-checked

tablecloths. The heavy, tangy, ketchup-based sauce is very good. Use it if you must, but do so sparingly.

1679 U.S. 87 S., 830-997-2353. Open Tue–Sun 11–3 or till meat runs out).

Closed first Sun of the month. crankyfranksbbq.com

Leon's World's Finest In & Out Bar-B-Que



Rating: 4

Opened: 2003

Pitmaster: Leon O'Neal, age 27

Method: Post oak; gas-fired smoker

Pro tip: Get ready for stories; Leon is a big talker.

Brazoria County native Leon O'Neal doesn't usually dress up, but he does often don a cowboy hat, even in the summer (when the headgear is made of straw and he may be wearing shorts). Dressed up or not, he and his sister will welcome you like honored guests to their simple little blue dining room, outfitted with red and green tablecloths. During most of his more than 25 years in the business, O'Neal cooked on a traditional smoker, but after

Hurricane Ike, in 2008, he switched to a commercial Ole Hickory smoker, which doesn't demand so much babying. He uses plenty of oak in it and gets a decent amount of smoke flavor, but sometimes a brisket will be a little dried out around the edge (though moist in the middle). When it comes to sausage, it's hard to choose between the big, fat, rice-stuffed boudin, with its fantastic pork flavor, or the coarsely ground, garlic-happy beef links, but the latter recipe is Leon's, so go with it. As for the peppery pork ribs, they simply hit the ball out of the park, with pink, tender, close-textured meat that clings lightly to the bone. Leon's original "stepped-up rice"—dotted with celery and jalapeño—is locally famous, and the sweet potato pie wins regular raves.

5427 Broadway, 409-744-0070. Open Mon–Thur 9:30–7:30, Fri & Sat 9:30–8:30, Sun 11–7:30. leonsbbq.com

Meshack's Bar-B-Que



Rating: 4.25

Opened: 2009

Pitmaster: Travis Mayes, age 64

Method: Pecan; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: Do not fear the enormous sandwich known as Da Jasper.

Meshack's takes the concept of a barbecue joint and reduces it to its most basic element: the meat and nothing else. There are no tables at which to sit and enjoy your food, no whimsical décor, really no ambience at all. Just a cinder-block shack crudely painted with images of ribs and sandwiches, a couple of stumps to sit on while you're waiting, and a weedy parking lot on a street lined with second-hand auto dealers and storage facilities. The rich smell of pecan smoke improves the atmosphere somewhat, but basically this is a 100 percent carryout operation (your food will emerge from the window wrapped up to go). We can't fault them, however, for putting the emphasis on the meat, not when the brisket we unwrapped back in our car had a perfect smoke ring and expertly rendered fat. The smoke flavor was bold—a little more so than at the oak-and hickory-fueled joints that predominate in the Dallas–Fort Worth area (as owner Travis Mayes says, “Hickory is the king, oak is the queen, pecan is the choice of professionals”). Both sauces, mild and spicy, were worth a dip, though neither was necessary to moisten the tender meat. They keep the menu simple at Meshack's: besides the brisket, there are pork ribs, sausage, baked beans, potato salad, and turkey legs. The ribs are prepared with a spicy dry rub and have a nice smooth crust; each flavorful bite pulled gently away from the bone. Meshack's doesn't make its own sausage, but the Smokey Denmark links had a nice dark-reddish color, a good snappy bite, a slightly coarse grind, and spicy a kick. Don't be deterred by the humble setting—this is great barbecue done right.

240 E. Avenue B, 214-227-4748. Open Tue 10:30–5, Wed–Sat 10:30–7.

City Meat Market



Rating: 4.25

Opened: 1941

Pitmaster: Gerald Birkelbach, age 57 (since 1982)

Method: Post oak; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: For a living history lesson, just sit quietly and watch the old-timers.

A welcome landmark on U.S. 290 between Austin and Houston is the boxy brick building of City Meat Market, in Giddings. The red painted sign reads “Bar-B-Q and Sausage”—sausage being one of their specialties. Walk through the main room, with its high ceilings, two rows of tables covered in plastic Christmas tablecloths (we last visited in late January), and aged cream-colored walls, and into the sooty back room, where you can order the famous links (80 percent beef, 20 percent pork) straight off the pit. The filling is pleasantly coarse in that way that you only find in homemade sausage, and the casing has a good snap. We could have kept eating these perfect links all day. We were less enthusiastic about the brisket, which cooks at a fairly high heat on an indirect pit for just five and a half hours. While the final result is seductively smoky and has a flavorful salt, pepper, and cayenne rub, the meat itself was a little tough. The ribs, on the other hand, do beautifully under this treatment. They are superlative: ultra-tender, delectably sweet, and infused

with post-oak smoke, much like the absolutely succulent chicken. As at any proper joint, black pepper is used liberally, and not just on the meats. It punches up the tangy, sweet sauce (one of our favorites in Central Texas) and gives a nice kick to pinto beans too. Admirable attention has been paid to the stellar potato salad, a bold and mustardy twist on the classic. Banana pudding is enjoyable enough once you forgive the fact that it looks like a meringue and isn't a pudding but a blob (with an oddly firm outer shell) of cream cake.

101 W. Austin (U.S. 290), 979-542-2740. Open Mon–Fri 7:30–5:30, Sat 7:30–4. citymeatmarket.biz

Bartley's Bar-B-Q



Rating: 4

Opened: 1968

Pitmaster: Shane Wilkinson, age 35 (since 2012)

Method: Hickory; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: The pecan cobbler comes from the bakery next door.

We walked through the doors of this thoroughly nondescript suburban strip center spot and were greeted by the heavenly incense of smoked meat—which carried us to the counter in a happy daze. Next, came an unsolicited, excruciatingly upbeat testimonial from a fellow patron, waiting and antsy for service: “Best barbecue around!” he blurted out. Finally, we ordered, and the sensory experience we’d been waiting for unfolded: The brisket was ringed in deep maroon, and walloped with smoke flavor; a stack of short, juicy pork ribs hid their fatty goodness under a slightly sweet and crackly bark; and the sausage was spicy and flavorful.

413 E. Northwest Hwy., 817-481-3212. Open Tue–Thur 10:30–8, Fri & Sat 10:30–9. bartleysbbq.com

Bob’s Bar-B-Que



Rating: 4

Opened: 1980

Pitmaster: Bob Allen, age 73

Method: Hickory; indirect-heat pit

***Pro tip:** Ask that the fat and crust be left on your brisket; otherwise it'll be trimmed off.*

Owner and pitmaster Bob Allen is just as guarded as he is hospitable, so don't expect a pit tour here. But though we could not see the equipment, we were assured that no gas was used in the preparation of the meat. The menu is simple, but it does include a few items of note. The spicy boudin was outstanding, with a casing taut and crisp enough to be eaten and a filling that was a good balance of savory, gamey, and spicy. You'd have to go to Louisiana to find better, but you could go a whole lot farther and still not turn up a better cobbler anywhere. We sat there for a long while, alternating bites between the pecan and peach, but a winner couldn't be declared. Get them both—and some more to take home. The ribs and brisket aren't half bad either. The St. Louis-cut ribs are thin on the meat, but what's there is good and smoky. The seasoning is almost nonexistent, but the flavor of the pork and smoke is deep. Getting top-shelf brisket here takes some effort, but it's worth it. When Allen starts slicing, ask for some of the crusty edge slices. This is where all the good stuff lives, but unless otherwise advised, Allen trims it off, because a lifetime of bad barbecue has conditioned his regulars to expect the area's usual monochromatic gray rectangles when they order brisket (when we heard this, we experienced a moment of sorrow). With the bark left on, the intensity of the smoke collides deliciously with the moist and tender meat beneath. If you're lucky, you might even get a condensed nugget of salty, crusty fat clinging to the edge of a slice. All you have to do is pay attention and ask nicely. Allen is mostly eager to please.

1205 Pope, 903-657-8301. Open Tue–Sat 10–7.

Gatlin's BBQ & Gatlin's BBQ & Catering



Rating: 4.25

Opened: 2010

Pitmaster: Greg Gatlin, age 33

Method: Hickory; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: The Cajun-style dirty rice has a fanatical following.

Greg Gatlin is in charge of the smoker, but he also bustles around taking orders and tidying up. So does his mom, who is responsible for the fine bread pudding and other sweets. After a wait—which is often lengthy—you’ll receive plates neatly stacked with precisely sliced meat. In case you’ve ever wondered what the deal is with different ribs, you’re in luck: Gatlin’s has two kinds. Side by side, you’ll see that the baby backs are shorter and more curved, with a rounder bone and more of the meat on the top. Now compare the St. Louis ribs. They’re bigger, and the bone is flatter and straighter, with more highly marbled meat. (If a little flap of meat and cartilage called the rib tip had been left on, you’d have a sparerib.) Arguments can get heated about which is better, but we thought they were both excellent and exceptionally moist. Our lean brisket, covered in a crust as black as midnight, was also impressive, though it did need more salt. But it was the three kinds of sausage that got our attention, especially the venison, with robust flavor and

a shiny, snappy natural casing. The chicken, sad to say, was very dry. Carry your order to a picnic table outside or settle down in the small room adorned with snapshots and a painting of a white-robed Jesus holding a miniature model of Gatlin's in his hands.

1221 W. 19th, 713-869-4227. Open Tue–Sat 11–7 or till meat runs out.

gatlinsbbq.com

Virgie's Bar-B-Que



Rating: 4

Opened: 2005

Pitmaster: Adrian Handsborough, age 48

Method: Oak; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: *Virgie's is named for Handsborough's mom, who taught him the art of smoking.*

The brawny pork ribs that emerge from the big metal smoker set a standard for the genre. They are massive, pink, and delicious, their meat lightly clinging to the bone until you grab a bite with your teeth and give a light tug. A heavy salty-peppery crust, without a trace of sweetness, lends depth of flavor to each piggy bite. There is no way to be genteel when consuming these

monsters, so pile up some extra napkins and dig in. They need no condiments, but the sweet sauce, with a hint of smoke and heat and a bit of a fruity undertone, provides a worthy complement. The brisket is satisfying, if less memorable than the ribs. It looks the part, with a jet-black outer crust, not too thick, and a good half-inch-deep smoke ring shading from red rose to soft pink, giving way to the warm brown of well-smoked meat. But it dries out pretty fast. The building itself is a humble affair, a long, low dining room painted beige with cedar wainscoting. It's the folks inside that make Virgie's something special: they're Texas friendly and make you feel right at home.

5535 N. Gessner, 713-466-6525. Open Tue 11–2, Wed–Fri 11–6:30, Sat 11–5:30.
virgiesbbq.com

Billy's Old Fashion BBQ

Rating: 4

Opened: Early eighties

Pitmaster: George Ralph Mahathay, age 67

Method: Hickory; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: Ask for your sauce on the side or your meat will come swimming in it.

You could lose a lot of tire tread and a little bit of soul looking for good barbecue in East Texas. But if you should find yourself in Jasper, mosey down Main Street, past the modest houses and packs of free-range dogs, and make the acquaintance of George Ralph Mahathay, better known as Billy, the nicest pitmaster you're likely to come across hereabouts. His establishment isn't much to look at—a tiny wood-frame, tin-roofed building equipped with a few cafe-style booths, a wall of family photos, and a little TV above the counter (playing *Designing Women* on our visit, naturally). But this 35-year-old joint is beloved among locals and even gets a few nods on the World Wide Web; one enthusiast claims he'd “drive 100 miles out of the way to get here.” Which, as noted above, is pretty much a requirement in this neck of the woods. Quality brisket is particularly hard to come by behind the Pine Curtain, but Billy, bless him, turns out tender slabs of nicely marbled meat (it spends a good 24 hours in his thirty-foot-long pit). The thick, fatty slices

were cut just right and redolent of hickory smoke (a blanket of sauce notwithstanding), and we couldn't stop eating them, despite stomachs sorely traumatized from ingesting lesser specimens earlier in the day. That same commitment to quality is just as evident in the hefty pork ribs lacquered in a slightly sweet glaze; the fat, juicy links of peppery sausage; and even the plump dollop of mustardy potato salad festooned with a cheerful cherry pepper.

1601 N. Main, 409-384-8384. Open Mon–Sat 11–6ish. Cash and check only.

Joseph's Riverport Barbecue



Rating: 4.5

Opened: 1993

Pitmaster: Stephen Joseph, age 45

Method: Post oak; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: The Swamp Fries put to shame all other cheese fries.

A devastating fire in 2012 destroyed all but the thin brick facade of this joint, which faces Polk Street in downtown Jefferson. But once the flames were

extinguished, owner and pitmaster Stephen Joseph started rebuilding, and seven months later he was christening the new Bewley smoker. The refurbished interior is now decorated with all manner of farm implements and just enough but not too many mounted animal heads. Place your order at the far end of a long dining room, which is filled with large communal tables and folding chairs. Meats are sliced in the kitchen, but the meat cutters are within shouting distance if you have special requests. A generous three-meat plate should be more than enough, but they sell by the pound here, so it just seemed more proper to get a sampling of the entire menu of meats. Joseph's offers a welcome respite from the unfortunate regional practice of trimming away all the fat and crust from a brisket and serving it gray and sauce-drenched—all the goodness is left on here, and sauce is unnecessary. A stout black crust held just the right amount of seasoning, and a layer of buttery fat added silkiness to the already moist slices. Pork ribs occupy the sweeter end of the spectrum, with a vinegar-and-mustard-based finishing glaze that gets its sweetness from brown sugar. They're cooked well, with juicy meat that comes easily away from the bone. The sausage from Kountry Boys had a solid kick of spices and a good snap. The skin on the chicken lacked crunch, while the turkey had formed an odd thin "skin" of its own (Joseph said he struggled with getting the breasts done before the unfortunate surface texture developed). In both cases the meat beneath was delectable with the right level of salt. This is barbecue that's on another level from most of what can be found in this part of the state.

201 N. Polk, 903-665-2341. Open Tue–Sat 11–7, Sun 11–2.

Buzzie's Bar-B-Q



Rating: 4.25

Opened: 1997

Pitmaster: Harold “Buzzie” Hughes, age 54

Method: Live oak; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: Get Buzzie to tell you about how she got started as a backyard cook.

Ordering brisket is a reflexive action for most eaters of Texas barbecue. And at a joint like Buzzie’s, with a reputation for expertly smoked beef, it’s truly a no-brainer. Where your tough choices come into play at this Hill Country standby is farther down the menu. If for some crazy reason you decide to order just one additional item, trust us when we tell you to go for the spareribs. This would mean forgoing the sausage, pork loin, turkey, and chicken, not to mention the standard side offerings, and a choice of peach, blackberry, or cherry cobbler and pecan pie. All of these are very fine foodstuffs, but on our last visit the spareribs were nothing short of heaven on a bone, substantial and smoky with just a hint of spice from the dry rub on their perfect crust.

213 Schreiner, 830-257-4540. Open Tue–Sat 11–8, Sun 11–3. Beer.

buzziesbbq.com

Hitch-N-Post BBQ



Rating: 4

Opened: 2009

Pitmaster: Billy Ray Nelson, age 62

Method: Red and white oak, pecan, and hickory; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: Order half a dozen more of the cinnamon-dusted fried rolls than you think you'll need.

Billy Ray Nelson is the former sheriff in these parts, but he had always dreamed of making real-deal barbecue his full-time gig once he retired. His wish came true four years ago, and boy, is that a good thing for the rest of us. Situated in a wide-open field on FM 350 and marked with a couple of banners (one sporting the joint's name, the other advertising a ribeye special and what looked to be a poison ivy help line), the Hitch-N-Post is two metal buildings spanned by a cozy porch furnished with a few tables and more than a few Texas tchotchkes (some of which are for sale, by the way). Though we arrived at the tail end of the day, Billy couldn't have been happier to set us up with a heaping plate of meat and a round of sweet iced tea. The juicy brisket came in big, thick pieces cut the way they're supposed to be, with just enough

rub to let the ten-to-twelve-hour-smoked-meat taste shine through. The hunky pork ribs were crowd-pleasers, lightly glazed, tender, and hot—pure meaty goodness. The sauce was a little dense, decent but unnecessary; the baked beans were standard; and the potato salad got two thumbs up. Next time we'll leave room for some of Nana Nelson's fine homemade buttermilk pecan pie.

1880 FM 350 S., 936-967-0161. Open Tue–Wed 10:30–3, Thur–Sat 10:30–6:30.

Cooper's Old Time Pit Bar-B-Que



Rating: 4.5

Opened: 1963

Pitmaster: Multiple

Method: Mesquite; direct-heat pit

Pro tip: Offset the price of the meat with a bowl of free beans.

Texas is in the midst of a barbecue renaissance, an age of smoky enlightenment. One need only sample the goods at new-guard

establishments like Franklin Barbecue, in Austin, or Pecan Lodge, in Dallas, to realize it. Yet in the face of all this newfangled excitement, Cooper's continues to soldier on—an intrepid old-timer, a barbecue stalwart that has appeared on every single one of these lists. If it ain't broke, as the saying goes, don't fix it (or put sauce on it). There are a number of establishments across the state, affiliated and not, that carry the Cooper's name (our favorite, after Llano, is the one in New Braunfels, a spanking-clean edition of the original that opened in 2008), but for pure, authentic grunge, we like this location, where if it's a weekend in spring or summer, you're likely to be waiting in line with a lot of bikers. Do as they do. First, eyeball the unbelievable array of meats in the immense serving pit—brisket, sirloin steak, pork chops, beef and pork ribs, cabrito, chicken, sausage. This is the most challenging part of the Cooper's experience, because you have to choose the pieces of meat you'll soon be eating, and the spectacle of that bounty has been known to overwhelm visitors and cause them to freeze up. Stay focused. The must-have is the pork chop, a two-inch-thick juicy slab, but get some of the smoky brisket too and at least one of the fat and bouncy beef ribs, which are coated in a thick, black, chewy crust. The chicken is moist and peppery, and the pork loin is super lean. The best sausage is the one with jalapeño in it. Having selected your meats, head down the line for sides (the jalapeño mac and cheese is excellent) and homemade desserts (apple, blackberry, peach, and pecan cobbler). Grab a cup of sauce from the condiments table—you won't actually need any on your meat, but the thin, tart mixture is worth a dip. Finally, head into the capacious dining room and take a seat at one of the long picnic tables. This is, just as the name suggests, old-time pit barbecue at its best.

604 W. Young (Texas Hwy. 29), 325-247-5713. Open Sun–Thur 10:30 –8, Fri & Sat 10:30–9. coopersbbq.com

Black's Barbecue



Rating: 4.25

Opened: 1932

Pitmaster: Kent Black, age 60

Method: Post oak; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: There are two cutting blocks. When Black's gets busy, it staffs the block on the left with what might be considered the B team of cutters. Always go to the one on the right.

Black's has little in common with the more publicized Kreuz or Smitty's other than that they are all in the same town. Instead of a mesmerizing encounter with a picturesque fire blazing at the end of an ancient brick pit like you'll find at Smitty's, at Black's you're funneled through a narrow corridor past an anticlimactic salad bar. But when you finally reach the meat counter, you'll find the most important difference between Black's and its Lockhart brethren—good brisket. Kent Black's methodology (developed by his parents, Edgar and Norma Jean) is definitely odd: briskets are cooked for eight hours in a Southern Pride rotisserie using only wood, no gas. This leaves them partially smoked. They're then stored for a couple days in a cooler, then smoked for four hours in the old brick pits. This may be the weirdest smoking routine in Texas, but it's hard to argue with the results. A

thick black crust covers the tender beef, and there's plenty of well-cooked fat with a deep and powerful smokiness that just isn't found elsewhere in town.

The rest of the menu isn't bad either. Enormous beef short ribs have as much as a nine-inch bone and weigh a pound and a half. They can also be a little uneven: On some visits we've had a rich, moist hunk of beef that comes apart effortlessly. On others, we've enjoyed the same spectacular flavor but with more chew than we'd like. Black's signature sausage (90 percent beef, 10 percent pork) is rustic, which is to say, you can taste that it's handmade but you also can taste, occasionally, a mouthful of link that's a little too liberally lubricated by the pool of hot grease formed by a large pocket of unincorporated fat. The flavor, however, is phenomenal, and there's little to complain about when it comes to the other cuts. The exemplary smoked turkey breast is dusted with just enough black pepper to give it some bite. On our last visit, pork chops were a new, and welcome, addition to the menu; ours was salty, smoky, and moist, with a nice ring of well-rendered fat hugging the exterior. For pork ribs you have a choice of baby backs and spares, but we prefer the latter, with their rough and ruddy surface speckled with black pepper.

215 N. Main, 512-398-2712. Open Sun–Thur 10–8, Fri & Sat 10–8:30. Beer.

blacksbbq.com

Kreuz Market



Rating: 4.25

Opened: 1990 (current location since 1999)

Pitmaster: Roy Perez, age 51

Method: Post oak; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: Get a photo with Perez. He's amenable and it's a great souvenir.

We wanted to keep this renowned spot at the top of our list, where it's been since our very first barbecue story, in 1973. But after repeated visits by various staffers, we had to be honest: we couldn't. The brisket was consistently disappointing. The scanty fat on the "fatty" was opaque and sinewy, the meat looked like shredded wheat, and the smoke was noticeably lacking on one visit too many. The shoulder clod was tender, but it's no stand-in for good brisket. Still, we realize, these are only two meats on the menu, and the remaining items were as heavenly as they've ever been. The thick pork chop was divinely smoky on every visit, and the snappy beef-and-pork sausage, heavy on the pepper, is truly one of the best in Barbecue-land. The pork spareribs tasted fresh, with plenty of juicy, delicious meat on them, and the beef ribs were scrumptious, if a little too chewy. There's no doubt this is still a barbecue institution (when owner Rick Schmidt retired in 2011, he sold the place to his son, Keith), and we'll definitely keep coming, not only for

the meats they do well but also for the experience of walking through the massive hall into the smoky cutting room where Roy Perez stands at the chopping block, with his distinctive mutton chop sideburns.

619 N. Colorado (U.S. 183), 512-398-2361. Open Mon–Sat 10:30–8. Beer. kreuzmarket.com

City Market



Rating: 4

Opened: 1958

Pitmaster: Joe Capello Sr., age 66 (since 1970)

Method: Post oak; indirect-heat pit and gas-fired smoker

Pro tip: Take home some sauce.

There are few places we love as much as the pit room at City Market. Entering the smoke-filled, glass-enclosed chamber at the back of the dining room is an experience you will remember for decades—a trip into an iconic, sacred space in the world of barbecue. Like Kreuz Market and Smitty's Market, in Lockhart, this joint has been a mainstay in our top tier for years,

and while we'd still recommend a visit, the tough, tasteless brisket from repeated visits over a series of months (and the impressive quality from new joints) has moved it down a notch. Maybe the layer of unrendered fat and lack of smoke is the result of the short cooking time—six to eight hours—or maybe it's the result of a lamentable new development at City Market. We didn't want to believe this at first, but it seems that this venerable old partisan of wood-smoking has, of late, been using a gas-fired Southern Pride smoker on the weekends to help provide for the heavy crowds. To discover the intrusion of gas into one of the canonical Central Texas joints was sort of like finding out that Willie Nelson lip-synchs, and we took it as a very dark and ominous sign. Thankfully, the other meats still stand out. The pork ribs, which showed a half-inch smoke ring, were the best thing on the menu: semisweet, meaty, and flavorful, with a perfect salty exterior. And when we bit into the homemade beef sausage ring, the snap was audible. Inside, the meat was coarse and juicy, with good seasoning. Though anything would be great dipped in City Market's thin mustard sauce, we were a little disappointed that we had to use it on the brisket.

633 E. Davis, 830-875-9019. Open Mon–Sat 7–6. Cash only. Beer.

Whup's Boomerang Bar-B-Que



Rating: 4

Opened: 2000

Pitmaster: Bennie Washington, age 62

Method: Mesquite, post oak, a little pecan; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: Whup was the owner's father.

You'll smell Whup's long before you see it, and despite signage and GPS, you'll probably miss the left turn that you have to make from Business State Highway 6. This cozy joint is not so much off the beaten the path as on it: a small, tidy house on a potholed dogleg road that's dotted with condemned, deteriorating shacks. Not so the home of Bennie Washington's sister, which is next door to his restaurant and accounts for its location here. Washington started smoking meat in his backyard in the mid-seventies and had a short-lived joint in the nineties. He built this place in 1999. The smoker is around the side, but you can still see all the wood piled up near the basketball hoop. Seating is outdoors and limited (three tables); after parking on the curbless, precipitously trenched side of the road, we joined a group of good ol' boys who had already ordered. While we waited, two different women pulled into the driveway to pick up their family's takeout orders. It's not easy to make the top fifty when brisket is the third-best option, but Whup's is still smoking

beef better than anyone in nearby Waco, and its other options shine. Ribs are the star, even when not perfectly prepared—the meat came off the bone too easily, almost to the point of being “pulled,” but the outer crust still had integrity, and the flavor was spectacular (Washington seasons the meat when it’s about 65 percent cooked). There’s also snappy, heavy-cased, tasty pork-and-beef sausage from Eckermann’s, as well as a decent hot link (with less of the crayon color that you get from most commercial red hots). Like most every joint in the general vicinity of Waco, Whup’s does a version of the Vitek’s “Gut Pak” (here it’s called the “Beandito”). We’re not sure if concocting one of those extreme Frito pies with the best possible smoked meat is an upgrade or beside the point, but hey, when in Baylor country, do as the Bears do.

1203 Bennett, 254-883-5770. Open Thur–Sat 10–8. Cash and checks only.

Hutchins BBQ



Rating: 4.25

Opened: 1978 (current location since 1991)

Pitmaster: Tim Hutchins, age 32 (since 1999)

Method: *Pecan, hickory, and mesquite; indirect-heat pit*

Pro tip: *Take a moment to read the newspaper clippings on the walls.*

Last June, after a one-alarm blaze left their pit room in shambles and their business on hold, the father-son team of Roy and Tim Hutchins began to rebuild. They documented the process on Facebook, offering reports from the construction site and musing about the psyche of the Texas barbecue purveyor (“A brisket sandwich was the very first thing I thought of when I woke up,” read one 6:34 a.m. post in early October). Finally, on November 15, they joyously proclaimed, “It’s go time!” and were back in business. This bit of news was “liked” by nearly 300 people. Count us among them. We rolled up to the barnlike joint (red-clapboard exterior, wood-paneled interior, parking lot full of pickups and SUVs) in February. The brisket—smoked for up to seventeen hours—was fatty nirvana, melt-in-your-mouth tender and haloed by a rosy smoke ring and a golden mantle of that blessed f-word (it could have stood an additional spanking of salt, though, and just a puff more of true smoke flavor). The St. Louis-cut ribs sported a sweet-but-not-too-sweet char and pulled nicely from the bone, and the sausage packed good flavor and a hint of unexpected heat. Sides were above par (particularly the broccoli slaw and dill-spiked potato salad), and the deep-auburn sauce earned our respect for its high pepper quotient.

1301 N. Tennessee, 972-548-2629. Open Sun–Thur 11–9, Fri & Sat 11–9:30. hutchinsbbq.net

Kirby’s Barbeque

Rating: *4.5*

Opened: *1991 (current location since 2008)*

Pitmaster: *Kirby Hyden, age 58*

Method: *Post oak; indirect-heat pit*

Pro tip: *If you’re driving through town looking for it, keep going; it’s about two miles south of the city limits sign.*

Kirby's is a living testament to the adage, "Teach your children well." Owner and pitmaster Kirby Hyden learned to smoke meats from his father, who learned from his father, and this family know-how proves to be a rich inheritance. In 1960 Hyden's grandfather opened a joint called Holloway's in a tiny building on the north side of town (his dad also opened a joint, in Groesbeck, in the late seventies). Hyden took over Holloway's in 1991, moved the operation to his newish metal building located across Texas Highway 14 from the Mexia-Limestone County Airport, and renamed it Kirby's. The new place has a bigger capacity; Hyden installed two large steel barrel smokers, which he fires up in tandem on the weekends, when they add ribs and chicken to the menu. But on any given day, briskets take up most of the real estate. The smoking process for those briskets is unique—Kirby starts them during the day, removes them from the smoker when he leaves for the night, then puts them back on the smoker to finish them when he arrives again at four in the morning. The result is stunning: the meat was deeply flavored, and each slice was moist and perfectly cooked (Kirby's charges extra for trimmed brisket, but you're going to want all the fat left on anyway). A heavy rub provided a real punch of saltiness and a hint of cayenne, but the meat wasn't overpowered. The spareribs, also coated with an impressive bark, were incredibly tender despite their heft. The sausage comes from Slovacek's, in Snook, and this version was smoky with a nice snap. The only disappointment was the soggy pulled pork, which can be skipped altogether. You'll find only the most basic of side items, but the buttermilk pie is worth a try. Let's just hope the knowledge that makes Kirby's so good can be passed on to the next generation.

4592 Texas Hwy. 14 N., 254-562-5076. Open Wed-Fri 10-6, Sat 10-3.

Hashknife on the Chisholm



Rating: 4

Opened: 2006

Pitmaster: Jim McLennan, age 51

Method: Pecan and oak; gas-fired smoker

Pro tip: Gargantuan loaves of yeast bread (just \$5) are made from scratch using the proprietor's grandmother's recipe.

Staunch traditionalists who refuse to eat meat that's been smoked in a gas-fired pit should drive right on past this remote joint just north of Mineral Wells without stopping. That way, there'll be more of the smoky brisket—cut into thick, beautifully fatty slices—for the rest of us. And the ribs, which devotees (mostly oil-field workers, farmers, and folks involved with cutting horses, which are big around here) would likely rather we not mention, lest there be a run on the pecan-smoked pigcicles, which are kissed with a hint of sweetness. Now, not to further kick up dust on the matter, but if pitmaster Jim McLennan—yep, that's him in the wide-brimmed palm-leaf cowboy hat—can produce barbecue this delectably smoky out of a gas oven, we're willing to overlook his preferred fuel source. He takes equal pride (rightfully) in his peppery hot links, Big Ol' Burgers (the half-pounders are made from 100 percent ground brisket), and griddle-fried chicken-fried steak. His wife,

Lesa, earns bragging rights of her own for her diet-wrecking desserts, including scratch-made pies (chocolate, peanut butter, and coconut, baked fresh on Thursdays), the best-selling banana cake, and the Oil Field Pudding, which is just a smidge sweeter than Jim's vinegary signature slaw. Once you've ordered your small feast at the counter (just past the shuffleboard table), pick a tall barstool inside or a picnic table out front of the humble red building, which used to be a filling station of a different kind.

8131 N. U.S. 281, 940-325-5150. Open Wed & Thur 11–8, Fri & Sat 11–9. Beer.

Cowpoke's

Rating: 4.25

Opened: 1993

Pitmaster: Multiple

Method: Mesquite; gas-fired smoker

Pro tip: *If you see a guy in coveralls, run to get in line ahead of him; he's probably ordering for fifteen.*

Even if the meat at Cowpoke's were terrible, the joint would be jam-packed at all hours, since it's located on the edge of the booming Eagle Ford Shale formation. But luckily for the patrons jawing about oil prices in the tidy dining room, the barbecue here is exceptional, certainly among the best in South Texas. The fatty brisket—which is cooked for fourteen hours, stored in a cooler overnight, and then finished in the cooker for a few more hours—is a particular standout, with its thick crust and perfectly rendered fat. The lean brisket is also moist and delectable, even in the late afternoon after a few hours under a heat lamp. We found the mesquite-smoked ribs to be a little tough, but they had a nice dark crust and a rich flavor. The building, which was rebuilt after a fire in 1993, the year Cowpoke's first opened, is shaped like a giant red barn and adorned inside with horseshoes, a few mounted deer heads, and an autographed photo of a very mustachioed Tom Selleck. If you can tear yourself away from his portrait, go back to the counter for some homemade pie.

*1855 W. Comal, 830-334-8000. Open Sun–Thur 8:30–8:30, Fri & Sat 8:30–9.
Beer.*

Pody's BBQ

Rating: 4

Opened: 2011

Pitmaster: Israel Campos, age 38

Method: Mesquite; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: Have a glass of iced tea—or a fire extinguisher—handy if you aim to try the sauce.

Israel “Pody” Campos used to live in Austin, where he worked for the Texas Municipal Police Association, training cops all over the state. When budget cuts forced the association to downsize a few years ago, he moved back home to Pecos and took up a job as the chief deputy of Reeves County. He also bought a laundromat and converted it into a barbecue joint that has the intimate feel of a small-town train station. Light streams in through the barred windows, dimpling the wood-paneled walls. Out back, Campos has a somewhat unconventional smoker he calls his “Lazy Susan.” It’s a black vertical cylinder with two rotating middle racks lacquered by years of drippings. We hadn’t seen a setup quite like this before, though as in an offset pit, the heat is indirect. Campos feeds his contraption a steady diet of mesquite but adds cherry, pecan, and oak “like they’re herbs.” In particular he uses cherry to sweeten his ribs, which had a thick crust and great flavor, though they were a tad dry. The brisket, with a nice red smoke ring, could also have been a bit more moist, but a judicious squirt of the sauce helps out. We say judicious because this is a spicy brew, with visible chunks of ghost and habanero peppers. It’s one of the many touches that gives Pody’s a distinctively West Texas feel, along with the frontier lettering on the Western facade and the green chile–cheddar pozole, which is rich and delicious and must be tried.

1330 S. Cedar, 432-448-4635. Open Tue–Sat 11–9.

Hatfields BBQ & Blackjacks Beer Garden

Rating: 4

Opened: 2012

Pitmaster: Kenny Hatfield, age 53

Method: Oak and mesquite; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: Kenny will barbecue pretty much any game you bring him.

This tidy cedar cabin only opened in November, but pitmaster and owner Kenny Hatfield has been perfecting his craft for years, barbecuing brisket each Friday for his friends and employees at his nearby flooring store. Hatfield smokes his brisket for eighteen hours over a mix of oak and mesquite in his custom-built pit, which he has affectionately dubbed the Big Nasty, an indirect-heat smoker so large that it sticks out the side of the building. The resulting brisket is flavorful and tender and boasts a thick crust. The pork ribs are coated with a not-too-sugary glaze, and the meat is succulent. Meals are served up on nifty little cedar planks (no red plastic here), and patrons can eat at the tall tables inside or snag a picnic bench outside in the beer garden. Hatfields is a family affair: Kenny works the pit, and if it's a weekend, his wife, Edna, a local schoolteacher, takes orders in the front. And the thick, sweet "Maddy Belle" sauce is named after their eleven-year-old daughter.

209 E. Cornwall, 361-729-2337. Open Tue–Sat 11–midnight, Sun noon–midnight. Beer. blackjacksbeer.com

The Granary 'Cue and Brew



Rating: 4

Opened: 2012

Pitmaster: Tim Rattray, age 30

Method: Oak; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: The beer is brewed in-house. And so are the pickles.

Not a typical joint by any means, the Granary is part of the flashy new Pearl retail/residential complex and occupies a renovated nineteenth-century home with high ceilings and dark-brown wood trim. The vibe is hipster carnivore: the music is modern, and the walls are covered with barbecue folk art, such as a painting of a pig with the names of his anatomy, *en français*. Speaking of pig, the Granary serves Carolina-style pulled pork that is chewy, smoky, and almost sweet (some of the strands had a black crust to them that were even chewier), but don't worry, they also do excellent Texas fare, such as a lean, smoky brisket with a perfect red-black crust. Our slices were a little dry, but the flavor had permeated deep into the meat. Sausage, turkey breast, and St. Louis ribs are all strong choices here. The German potato salad had bacon and herbs; the buttermilk coleslaw was easy on the sauce—so that we could actually taste the cabbage. The barbecue is served at lunch—from eleven until it runs out (at twelve-thirty, three of the five meats were gone).

The dinnertime menu is more elaborate—Szechuan duck leg and Moroccan lamb shoulder. Like we said, not your typical joint.

602 Avenue A, 210-228-0124. Open Tue–Sat 11–2 or till meat runs out. Beer & wine. thegranarysa.com

Two Bros. BBQ Market



Rating: 4.25

Opened: 2009

Pitmaster: Emilio Soliz, age 29 (since 2011)

Method: Oak; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: Get a few of the bacon-wrapped, cheese-stuffed jalapeños; that's them on the cover of our barbecue editor's book.

Local celebrity chef Jason Dady—who co-owns the place with his brother Jake and wife, Crystal—has gone the route of high-end barbecue in this north San Antonio location. Here, just about everything is done by hand and recipes are original. The brisket has a deep, rich taste; the crust is thick and crumbly with a lot of fat; and the meat falls apart with a slight tug, just like we

like it. The pork ribs are huge and moist with a lovely black crust, but the most popular ribs are the cherry-glazed baby backs. If you're in a piggish mood, also try the pork butt, which is made into pulled pork spiced with the same rub that is used on the brisket. Firm, juicy sausage makes a fine chaser. The sauces—one sweet, one tangy, and one made from molasses, coffee, and Shiner beer—are worth a try. As for sides, the coleslaw is zesty, and the beans have peaches in them, which is a little weird but just go with it—they're good. The homemade desserts are amazing; indeed, the strawberry fried pie, which is served warm, may be the single best thing you will put in your mouth this month.

12656 West Ave., 210-496-0222. Open Mon–Sat 10:30–8:30, Sun 11–7. Beer & wine. twobrosbbqmarket.com

Hays Co. Bar-B-Que and Catering



Rating: 4

Opened: 2007

Pitmasters: Michael Hernandez, age 39, Aaron Hernandez, age 19 (since 2009), and Omar Serna, age 40 (since 2012)

Method: *Post oak; indirect-heat pit*

Pro tip: *The mustard sauce is as good as City Market's.*

Longtime San Marcosans may recall this place as the former home of Woody's, a barbecue joint that opened in 1984. It was taken over in 2007 by the Hernandez family, and in 2011 they changed the name to Hays Co. Bar-B-Que and Catering. Last we checked, this venue does welcome customers who are not Bobcat fans, but a Bobcat booster would certainly feel at home amid all the Texas State decor. While we waited in line, a friendly customer recommended the pork chop, so we started there. It was a stunning piece of meat. A generous slice had almost a bark of pepper on one side, and while it was a tiny bit dry, the taste had the perfect amount of smoke. The brisket, which is Certified Angus cooked for eighteen to twenty hours, boasted a nice half-inch smoke ring and pepper on the exterior, and the pork ribs were fine and meaty. Two kinds of homemade sausage appear on the menu—jalapeño-cheese and regular—and at the suggestion of a counter person in the cafeteria line, we got the jalapeño-cheese. It was tied in a ring and had a perfect snap (beef and Boston pork butt go into the filling). The turkey proved outstanding, with a peppery exterior, smoky flavor, and a juiciness that made the slice glisten. We found the sides decent, and the sweet, thick red sauce had lots of pepper flakes. By the time the meal was over, we were ready to shout “Go, Bobcats!”

2601 Hunter Rd., 512-392-6000. Open Mon–Sat 11–8. hayscobbq.com

Zimmerhanzel's BBQ

Rating: *4*

Opened: *1980*

Pitmaster: *Bert Bunte, age 54 (since 1984)*

Method: *Post oak; indirect-heat pit*

Pro tip: *Thursday, Friday, and Saturday they offer pork butt, which is tender and yielding.*

Only a few folks were eating lunch when we arrived in this small, well-lit room decorated with mounted deer, but since we had seen the massive pits outside and the piles of post oak, we speculated that a good meal was ahead. We were right. The fat on the brisket wasn't as rendered as it could have been, but the thick cuts had a quarter-inch smoke ring and a rich flavor and didn't require a fork. Sadly, the same couldn't be said for the lean cuts, but we didn't mourn them for long, as the beautiful pork ribs were next. Thick, meaty, pink, and rubbed with pepper, there wasn't a bad bite on the entire bone. We dipped a piece in the thin sauce, which offered a light tang. The chicken, which was beautiful, with glistening peppery skin, looked a little better than it tasted (about average), but the sausage was a winner: homemade all-beef links with chunks of pepper and no filler.

Zimmerhanzel's is co-owned by husband and wife Bert and Dee Bunte (it's her maiden name up there on the sign). They opened the place right before Dee Dee graduated from high school, and it's still going strong. Bert doesn't let anyone else cook for him: every day he stuffs the sausage, seasons and smokes the meat, and makes the beans and sauce. Oddly, he told us that he quit putting bacon in his beans because the vegetarians complained. Which raises the question: What is a vegetarian doing in a place like this?

307 Royston, 512-237-4244. Open Mon–Fri 8:30–5, Sat 8:30 till meat runs out. Cash or check only. zimmerhanzelsbarbeque.com

Opie's Barbecue



Rating: 4.5

Opened: 1999

Pitmaster: Marco Oglesby, age 31 (since 2007)

Method: Mesquite; indirect- and direct-heat pits

Pro tip: Most of the desserts can feed a crowd.

Upon walking through Opie's front door you will immediately be confronted by a gleaming black metal box. If it's your first visit, you'll probably think to yourself that this behemoth is a little too clean and a little too showy to contain top-quality barbecue. But just wait until the lid is lifted, and you'll begin to quiver a bit in the presence of a beautiful bounty of meaty goodness. Opie's, like Cooper's, is a pick-your-meat-from-the-show-pit kind of joint, and once you recover from your swoon, an attendant is standing by to assist you in your selections. We recommend getting the brisket, a little bit of both the regular and jalapeño sausage, half a rack of sweet-and-spicy baby back ribs, and one of Opie's enormous pork chops (there are also pork spareribs, pork loin, pulled pork, beef ribs, and chicken). Proceed to the counter for slicing, weighing, and paying, and get some sides while you're at it. The spicy corn is great, as is the decadent tater tot casserole (and beans are gratis). Find a table in the large dining room and ready yourself for moist and tender

brisket with a perfectly seasoned black bark, lovely baby backs, hearty sausage, and the absolutely stunning (in both appearance and flavor) pork chop. All are sublimely smoky, just the way the good Lord intended. If you're still conscious after this bonanza, look for the off-menu Coca-Cola cake.

9504 E. Texas Hwy. 71, 830-693-8660. Open Mon & Tues 11–4, Wed & Thur 11–7, Fri & Sat 11–8, Sun 11–7. opiesbarbecue.com

Corkscrew BBQ



Rating: 4.25

Opened: 2011

Pitmaster: Will Buckman, age 34

Method: Red oak; indirect-heat pit

Pro tip: The green-chile ranch dressing on the brisket tacos is homemade. Get some, even just to dip your pinky in.

Set among a relentless suburban grid of drab brown-and-gray strip malls north of Houston, Corkscrew BBQ's riotous pink-and-black mini-campus of trailers and smoke shacks stands out like a Longhorn in College Station. This

is appropriate, however, considering that Corkscrew represents a new generation of barbecue in Houston. Pitmaster Will Buckman smokes his brisket with a clear Central Texas influence—for up to twelve hours using only red oak, resulting in heavy smoke penetration and crusty, char-y salt-and-pepper bark. It's that essence of smoke and perfectly rendered fat—cooked with relentless consistency day in and day-out—that might cause a barbecue traveler to think he's in one of the barbecue temples of Central Texas. But an East Texas influence makes an appearance in the exemplary spareribs: big slabs of porky goodness with knuckles and tips all intact and painted with a not-too-wet, not-too-sweet mop flecked with bits of chile pepper.

And if you want to branch out from the usual Texas barbecue standbys, try the superb pulled pork and smoked turkey. Will's wife and co-owner Nichole Buckman's sides and desserts are also garnering notice—especially the homemade cobbler with a buttery, flaky crust and fruity fillings (peach, blueberry, apple, pineapple, and cherry are usually in the rotation). But whatever you order, get there early—menu items start getting crossed off around noon and they might all be gone by one. Fortunately, expanded capacity may be on the way. A much-publicized dust-up with a nearby brick-and-mortar barbecue restaurant over whether Corkscrew's ramble of temporary buildings was up to code has prodded the Buckmans to start the process of opening their own storefront. Which is a blessing and a curse. An air-conditioned dining room would be a welcome environment in the heat of a Texas summer. But with the current set-up, there really isn't a better way to experience barbecue in Houston than at one of the outdoor picnic tables under Corkscrew's big metal awning on a cool fall or spring morning. Enjoy the breeze, the smoke-filled air, and the heavy rotation of Willie and Waylon on the speakers, as you savor every sublime bite of meat.

24930 Budde Rd., 832-592-1184. Open Tues–Sat 11 till meat runs out.

corkscrewbbq.com

Stanley's Famous Pit Barbecue



Rating: 4.5

Opened: 1959

Pitmasters: Nick Pencis, age 36 (since 2006), and Jonathan Shaw, age 34 (since 2009)

Method: Pecan; gas-fired smoker (ribs); indirect-heat (everything else)

Pro tip: Stop by in the morning and try a “breakfast bowl”; then go back to bed.

Owner Nick Pencis isn’t going to take it anymore. For years he felt compelled by regional tastes to serve lightly seasoned briskets without a speck of fat on them. But when he renovated his restaurant in 2012 (adding a new bar and patio along with an impressive pit room), a few of the menu items got a makeover as well. The brisket now receives a more aggressive dusting of salt and coarse black pepper, and just as important, the servers don’t automatically trim it anymore. He’s also replaced a boring commercial sausage with a special-recipe pork sausage from a local butcher shop. Both changes constitute major improvements for a joint that was already great, largely on the basis of the pork ribs. It’s the ribs that justify that adjective in the place’s name (that and Pencis’s infectious humor). These baby backs, rubbed with an eleven-spice mixture, are saucy, messy, sweet, and delicious. We’d prefer a deeper smokiness or a more well-defined bark, but it’s not hard

to clean the meat from these bones. Another standout at Stanley's is the smoked turkey—peppery and moist and surely among the state's best. We also like the pulled pork, which has a few crispy bits of bark sprinkled in and a good vinegary sauce. Now that Central Texas-style brisket and sausage have been added to the menu's East Texas specialties, we recommend going all in and getting the four-meat sampler platter. No sides come with this protein fest, so you can concentrate on the main event. Unusual for a barbecue joint, Stanley's serves breakfast and dinner in addition to lunch, so feel free to eat here three times a day.

525 S. Beckham Ave., 903-593-0311. Breakfast Mon–Fri 7–10; lunch and dinner Mon–Sat 11–9. Full bar. stanleysfamous.com

Mumphord's Place BBQ

Rating: 4

Opened: 2000

Pitmasters: Ricky Mumphord, age 55; Keith Mumphord, age 48; Bubba Barnes, age 61; and Ernest Rucker, age 50

Method: Mesquite and oak; direct-heat pit

Pro tip: The chocolate cake with cream cheese icing is made by a local church lady. And it's divine.

The minute you park, you'll be drawn like a moth to the glowing fireboxes and pits in the screened-in shed out back. That's where the action is—and frankly, we wondered how the pitmaster gets any work done, he's so busy posing for pictures with guests and explaining to newbies how it all works. This is “cowboy-style” barbecue, where the wood is burned to coals, then transferred to large metal pits in which the meat is placed on grates set about four feet directly above the heat. It's a tricky method. The meat cooks fast—eight hours for the brisket, two for the ribs—so you're unlikely to find the tenderness and smokiness you get from an indirect-heat pit. But the flavor is good, and in a part of the state where quality 'cue of any kind is scarce, Mumphord's does a better than decent job. In fact, customers come from miles around to tuck into 30 to 35 briskets a day, more on the weekends.

With a mesquite bite mellowed out by oak smoke, the brisket comes off reasonably moist. The pork ribs go quick, but the coarsely grained pork and beef sausage, mildly flavored, with a nice snap to the casing, is a decent substitute. Those in the know order sliced pork shoulder and turkey breast, and the staff always recommends the crisp garlic-buttery green beans. Take their advice. And be sure to stick around for a while, because part of the fun is being there, in the room with its red-checked tablecloths, sports photos, trophies, cow skulls, an ancient icebox, a sword, old firearms and cameras, beer cans, and heaven knows what else.

1202 E. Juan Linn, 361-485-1112. Open Tue–Thur 11–7, Fri 11–8, Sat 11–6.

Big Boy's Bar-B-Que



Rating: 4

Opened: 2000

Pitmaster: Gaylan Marth, age 57

Method: Mesquite; direct-heat pit

Pro tip: Save room for Mrs. Marth's made-from-scratch key lime pie if you can.

The exceptional thing to note about Big Boy's Bar-B-Que is the fact that it exists at all. Located in a caliche lot along a desolate road in Sweetwater next to a bowling alley turned bar, Big Boy's has the feel of an oasis—or a mirage. Blink and it might disappear. But Big Boy's isn't going anywhere. In fact, it was Harold's, the venerable joint forty miles up the interstate in Abilene, that disappeared, back in 2011, and ever since, barbecue hounds from that city and surrounding counties have gotten used to the trek to Big Boy's. The reward for these desert pilgrims is the meat, which is hands-down the best in the region. Travel west or northwest from Sweetwater, in an area roughly the size of Pennsylvania, and you won't find anything that touches the plates served here. Pitmaster Gaylan Marth cooks all his meat over mesquite-fueled pits (of his own design) in a porch behind the main restaurant. The brisket, cooked for between seven and nine hours, comes out with a salty-peppery, saliva-inducing kick and will melt in your mouth and make you forget about the dusty landscape around you. Be sure to get the lean side, though. Direct heat often cooks brisket too fast to properly render the fatty end, and that's definitely the case at Big Boy's (as Marth himself will tell you). On the other hand, it may be just as well, since you'll want to save room for the pork ribs. They come in two varieties, "My Ribs" and "Your Ribs." These names originated with Mr. and Mrs. Marth. If traditional pork spareribs are your thing, order the Your Ribs (Mrs. Marth's favorite). The My Ribs (Mr. Marth's preferred variety) are a bit different, a country-style rib cut from pork butt. Both are served with a light candied glaze that Marth makes himself and that doesn't overpower the flavor from the salt-and-pepper rub or the delightful smokiness in each bite. Finally, atmosphere may be incidental to the barbecue experience, but we must point out that the attractive pigskin-covered tables and chairs are imported from Guadalajara.

2117 Lamar, 325-235-2700. Open Wed–Sat 11–8. Beer & wine.